Fuel Cell Electricity to be Encouraged

SACRAMENTO – A new public/private collaborative seeking to reduce the demand on California's electrical grid and existing power plants by encouraging commercialization of fuel cells, held its first organizational meeting at Cal/EPA headquarters in Sacramento. A series of preparatory meetings were organized by the governor's Office of Planning and Research.

At the kickoff, S. David Freeman, Governor Gray Davis' senior energy advisor, stressed to the group, "Previously the benefits of fuel cell technology were not cost effective. But with the present price of electricity and unreliability of service, they are now a very attractive alternative. The benefits of fuel cell technology are very much in line with our state's economic and environmental concerns. We can and should usher in a new era of ecology and source diversification through this renewable energy." Freeman challenged the group of government officials to, "Move fuel cell technology out of the lab and into the market place." That message was echoed by Dr. Woodrow Clark from the governor's office and co-chair of the collaborative, "We now have the resources, opportunity and technology to install fuel cells for power generation throughout the state by next summer."

Cal/EPA Secretary Winston H. Hickox noted that, "The current electricity dilemma underscores the fact that Californians need energy which is available, affordable and clean. I look forward to fuel cells joining the mix of sources which power California."

The collaborative advocates fuel cells as an environmentally friendly and economically sound choice to back-up generators and other stationary power production needs, including residential, commercial, institutional, and industrial applications. Fuel cells use a chemical process to produce reliable and stable electricity with little harmful emissions. Some varieties of the technology produce only pure water as a byproduct.

The collaborative's members and advisory group represent a broad spectrum of organizations: California state government agencies, (Governor's Office, California Environmental Protection Agency [Cal/EPA], Governor's Office of Planning and Research, Air Resources Board, Resources Agency, Department of General Services, Public Utilities Commission, Energy Commission, Business Transportation and Housing Agency, Department of Transportation, and Trade and Commerce Agency); federal government agencies (U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Energy, U.S. EPA); local government agencies (South Coast Air Quality Management District, Los Angeles Department of Water and Power), the National Fuel Cell Research Center (NFCRC) located at the University of California-Irvine, and a variety of private entities. Near term goals include the coordination of interested parties and the facilitation of early implementation of units to serve as demonstrations of feasibility.

The Air Resources Board Chairman, Dr. Alan Lloyd, stated, "The new collaborative complements California's efforts to encourage the use of this technology in cars through the California Fuel Cell Partnership."

"The successful integration of fuel cell technology into the market is arguably one of the more effective strategies we can take to resolve the energy and environmental challenges that now exist in California," said Professor Scott Samuelsen, Director of the National Fuel Cell Research Center at the University of California, Irvine. "The collaborative will speed this process, and the NFCRC is pleased to support and facilitate the strategic alliance that has been formed through this effort."

"Fuel cells produce electricity with little or no emissions," said Cynthia Verdugo-Peralta, Gov. Davis' appointee to the South Coast Air Quality Management District Governing Board. "They hold great potential to help ease the energy crisis as well as to reduce some of the most severe air pollution in the nation, in Southern California and across the state."

Dr. Terry Surles, the head of the California Energy Commission, Public Interest Research Programs, expressed the need to, "Demonstrate the technology now in commercial applications in a variety of ways. That is why government needs to take the lead."

First used in America's space program and currently being demonstrated successfully in cars, trucks, and buses, fuel cell technology has many other potential applications. If used for industrial and eventually residential power generation it can reduce air pollutants and greenhouse gas emissions, increase energy efficiency, diversity and independence, and help California realize a stable, sustainable energy supply. The collaborative hopes that encouraging commercialization now will assure a significant place for this technology in California's power generating future.